Sketch

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The Dispossessed

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Abstract

FOR all its destruction, there is something powerful in a flood, something spell-binding to watch. . . . People moving. I had seen them on the Autobahn, riding in the old buses, those rust and green camouflaged buses that different groups had commandeered, fully loaded and sometimes flying red flags...

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People moving. I had seen them on the *Autobahn,* riding in the old buses, those rust and green camouflaged buses that different groups had commandeered, fully loaded and sometimes flying red flags. I had seen them on the back roads, plodding along on foot . . . riding bicycles and carrying packs on their backs . . . in old farm wagons loaded with bedding or clothing and a few pots and pans . . . people on foot . . . trucks of the U. S. Army loaded with a human cargo. Everywhere on the road as soon as the army had passed through people were on the road, like gypsies. Hey, you, Roo-ske? "*Ja!*" Pol-ske? "*Ja!*" French? "*Oui!*"

Where were they all coming from? Where were they going? Did they know? How could they possibly make out? Those women with the young babies? The old people? I saw them in the fields at night. I heard the tales that frightened German civilians told of the raiding parties, the purchases made at pistol point.

I crossed the weedy, dusty yard of the Displaced Persons camp. The group under the trees had come in this morning. Three days at least of riding in box cars, like cattle—but no, they were human. What they couldn't do with soap and water if they had it! Dust them with DDT. Ration the relief supplies out in the long, waiting queues. Stick to regulations and be ready

to "load them out" on order. Then prepare for the next shipment.

I came up behind the group which was standing in a large semi-circle. A man in the center played a wheezing accordion. The tune was a fast one, a polka, rollicking and gay, and while he played, dancers bounced and spun to the music. I looked around at the group. They were being returned to Russia, at least, to destination in the Russian zone. The tall fellow, raw-boned, the blank, gaunt face, thick unkept beard; was he really eager to go back? Or was he like many of them, especially the Poles, uncertain of his fate, unwilling to go back? They had an option: go and accept their fate, or remain in Germany and assume the responsibility of caring for themselves and of living under the same conditions as the Germans.

Tomorrow morning the trucks would roll in for some of them. The large brick building would be partially emptied of its 300 occupants. The rooms would be bare again except for the straw ticks on the floor. They would stand in line waiting to be checked off the lists, a strange congregation wearing parts of uniforms from enough different armies to make them a foreign legion. Yes, undoubtedly some in the group would call themselves "Stateless people" and there would be trouble to move them on. Others would be left behind, as was the case with the worried, dark little woman last time. I had been watching the loading procedure at the trucks when she came up to me, almost in desperation. "You are off-i-ceer?" she inquired anxiously. "My man. He very sick. He must a doctor see. No, no! Not a German doctor. They would kill him. Have you not American doctors?" Cases like that would have to be handled in the small German hospital.

The woman at my side, balancing the small baby on her hip, where was her husband? How old was she? Certainly less than 25 but she looked ten years older. Her shoulders drooped and there were lines of fatigue in her face. The bones of her face were prominent and her cheeks were hollow. Her eyes were dull, yet quick to move, to observe. I thought of some hunted animal. When she shifted weight, it was with a tired effort that she jogged the baby back up on her hip. I wanted to help her. She certainly needed it, for a tiny girl clutched at her drab and plain cotton skirt. The child's blonde hair might have been soft and lustrous if it had been given the proper care. And if circum-

stances had been different, it might have been tied lovingly in place with a hair ribbon. There would have been shoes and she would have been wearing a clean dress. Her face wouldn't have been streaked with dirt either. She hid in front of her mother when she noticed that she was being watched. Her mother seemed to have forgotten her, listening to the accordion and watching the dancers.

And there was Wynzioski out there dancing with a Russian girl, a buxom young thing. If he liked it so well here, perhaps it would be best to leave him with them. At least he wouldn't cause any more trouble for the company. But if he should get mixed into a bunch and get back to Russia, what a peck of trouble he would give the Russians! Well, Wynzioski would just have to report to me later. I would reprimand him on being out of uniform and for a sloppy appearance. And then, "Wynzioski, you know that fraternization isn't permitted." To which he would probably say, "But she wasn't a German," and then perhaps add, "and nobody said nothing about these," knowing very well that the practice was not encouraged. Nothing you could do to punish him. No use to restrict him, for there was no place for him to go anyway. Yes, and the girl is wearing an army shirt. It might even have belonged to Wynzioski.

There on the other side of the circle was the tall, slim blonde that Mathers had mentioned not long ago. "She asked me for a cigarette," he had confided in me, "and I gave her one." He had watched every move she had made. Then, a bit bolder, he added, "Ain't she sexy though, Lieutenant? Man, I'm really in solid with her." She was cleaner and somewhat better dressed than the others. She was the only one who resembled an American girl in the least. (Oh, to *see* some fresh, spirited American girls!) I watched Mathers sidle up to the girl later and saw her turn coldly away from him on her heel and pay him no attention.

The polka finished and the accordionist fingered his instrument a moment and then carefully pulled out of it a mournful melody to accompany a melancholy ballad. It seemed to set the mood too well. These people were never referred to as refugees. Somehow, the word didn't fit. Fugitives, no. Transients, perhaps. Dispossessed, even better. They were all lumped into one classification, D.P., Displaced Persons, whatever that meant. People who somehow weren't where they were supposed to be. So, you followed the regulations, herded them into collection

points, the old people, the mothers, the pregnant women, the children, old at their young age. You separated them and classified them. These to Eastern Europe on the train to Leipzig, these to the West, and the Jews? They weren't wanted anywhere. So you shipped everyone on, somewhere, and wondered if they would ever stop coming.

Well, soon it would be chow time. Sergeant Wales would have to get some guard at the door, for there were always the same stories . . . My man is sick, my children are small . . . and always the same answer—"I'm sorry. We can't permit you to carry out food without special permission. You see, so many people try to get more than their share that way. We must divide it evenly among you all." Sometimes there would be an argument involving bits of Russian, bits of German and some English along with a wild waving of hands and gesturing. Generally the answer was accepted meekly.

But the food itself—a large slab of black bread with margerine or lard, soup in tin cans and black coffee. The heavy odor of the black bread, spicy but sour, clung to the wooden kitchen all day. And the people—how they watched for the door to open, how they watched a GI eating an apple or orange that he had saved from his meal. . . .

The flood had spent itself. Behind it are the muddy plains and the small pools.

—Burnell Held, Ag Ec., Sr.

Home Sweet Home

A Little House, green garden, Birdsong,
the daily argument—and thou.

GEORGE settled down comfortably on the sofa and began reading the evening paper. His wife was ironing in the next room. The house was too warm. He drowsed and in a few minutes the paper slipped slowly down into his lap. For a while the only sounds in the house were the rhythmic strokes of the iron and the rustle of the crumpled paper, disturbed by his breathing.